

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH BISHOP CHRISTOPHER C. WALKER

CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
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Interview with Bishop Christopher C. Walker
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
Thursday, 28 July 2022

Location: Department of Museums, Archives and Rare Books, KSU Center, Kennesaw State University

TS: Reverend Walker, you have got a very interesting family tree. Why don't we start with Isom Jackson? Tell us who he was.

CW: Isom Jackson was a slave purchased in South Carolina, who made his way through escape on the Trail of Tears with the Cherokee Indians. That's how he ended up in Oklahoma, which was considered Indian territory at that time. There he married another slave by the name of Julia McBride.

TS: But he wasn't a slave any longer, I gather?

CW: He was no longer a slave then because he was on Indian territory. What was explained to me: On some of the reservations in Indian territory, they still had some Blacks as slaves.

TS: Some of the Cherokee Indians owned slaves before they ever went to Oklahoma.

CW: Exactly.

TS: And so, his wife was probably enslaved by a Cherokee?

CW: Could possibly. The other part of the history is for some reason he was traded off. I don't know if he was sold or traded to the Choctaw Indians.

TS: Oh, so maybe he wasn't free at that time?

CW: Probably was not free. Because a lot of oral history was passed to me that we had a lot of Choctaw freedmen that were in our family and that was somewhat connected to him.

TS: Do you know where in South Carolina he was enslaved?

CW: They said Charleston is where he was sold. On the docks there in Charleston.

TS: You mean when he came from Africa?

CW: Absolutely—when he came from Africa.

TS: Do you know what part of Africa? Any tradition?

CW: No, don't know.

TS: So, he was sold in Charleston and taken by a master to somewhere in South Carolina?

CW: Yes.

TS: And then probably was sold to a Native American?

CW: Ran away. And he ends up with the Cherokee Indians on the Trail of Tears.

TS: So maybe he was still free?

CW: May have been still free at that time, yes.

TS: It wouldn't be unusual for a free person to marry an enslaved person.

CW: Right, right. That wasn't unusual. You would find a lot of that because they wanted to stay within the race. Whether they were enslaved or not enslaved, they married and tried to stay married within the race. But there was some intermingling with the Native Americans. We know that through history.

TS: So, you think you have some Choctaw ancestors through Isom Jackson's wife?

CW: Absolutely. Julia McBride. There is a whole other family tree section with her that's really extensive. I haven't done a lot of deep diving as it relates to that side. But that's who I know he married, and that's documented as well.

TS: So, Isom Jackson and Julia McBride are married and living in Oklahoma, and then did they have children?

CW: A lot of children.

TS: Which one is your ancestor?

CW: My ancestor is Veltee Walker. She was originally a Fulsom. Her dad was George Fulsom, who was a descendant of Isom Jackson, which comes from my father's mother's side. He was considered my father's mother's cousin. Isom Jackson was the cousin of my grandmother on my father's side. With the Jackson line, you have some Fulsoms that were there through marriage. Isom Jackson married Julia McBride. With his children, there were multiple marriages, so to speak. Or there were other children birthed from different women. There were different mothers in there somewhere where the descendants came, and they had different last names. But Isom Jackson was a cousin of my grandmother on my father's side.

TS: What do you know about the McBrides?

CW: Not much. I know Julia McBride was a slave. The McBride family, of course, were Irish. The slaveowners were Irish. They were also in Oklahoma, in a small area called

Fort Towson, Oklahoma [Choctaw County]. It is right on the border of Arkansas and Oklahoma in the southeast corner of Oklahoma, close to the state line of Texas as well, by the Red River.

TS: How did the Fulsoms fit into the story?

CW: Oh, boy, that's a long story. The Fulsoms were half Cherokee Indians. My grandmother on my father's side carried that maiden name, Fulsom. From what I recollect and understand through oral history, George Fulsom had, I want to say fourteen children.

TS: Wow.

CW: They were mixed with Choctaw Indians. So, they were very dark complected, but had hair down their backs, all of them. They were all birthed in that same area, the Hugo/Fort Towson area of southeast Oklahoma.

TS: Was George Fulsom a farmer, or what do you know about him?

CW: I don't know much about him or what he did. That side of the family, I didn't study much. But I know he had a lot of children. I know that much.

TS: So how do we get to Veltee?

CW: Veltee is one of George Fulsom's children, and Veltee marries Hosea Walker, which is my father's father. Veltee is my father's mother.

TS: Do you know anything about the Walkers before Hosea?

CW: Hosea's father was Jacob Walker, Jake for short. Jake was from the West Indies, Jamaica. He was a slave, who made it here by boat through New Orleans and made his way to [southwest] Arkansas, Hempstead County. But Jacob Walker was a preacher—Jamaican, very heavy accent from what I'm told, rode a white horse, and traveled and preached.

TS: Circuit rider.

CW: Circuit rider. True sense of the word of a circuit riding preacher. And that was Jacob Walker, who was considered my father's grandfather on my father's side. Jacob Walker married Polly Josephine Gamble. She was a Gamble. They had fourteen or fifteen children—a lot of children at that time. She died early. They said it was from what they would call consumption back in those days. He was young. He was in his early fifties at that time. But he was a circuit riding preacher, rode a white horse.

TS: What denomination? Baptist?

CW: It wasn't really said, but he was probably a Baptist preacher.

TS: Preached to whomever gathered.

CW: Whomever gathered around. He played guitar and sang and preached. They said that was one of his particular fortes. A song would erupt in the middle of the sermon. He would sing and then go back to preaching. As he was inspired to sing while he preached, he sang and then went back to preaching. It was almost like he sang his own song, played his own instrument, and preached his own message.

TS: He made up his own songs?

CW: Yes. He created some of his own songs during that time. And so, he was a true sense of the word circuit rider preacher.

TS: Wouldn't it be great if we had recordings of some of the songs.

CW: Now, my dad may have some of that. I just haven't questioned him in that depth as to do you know any of the songs he sang or anything like that. But it was said that he did have some contact with the late great Bishop C. H. Mason [Bishop Charles Harrison Mason Sr., 1866-1961.]

TS: [Founder of] the Church of God in Christ?

CW: Church of God in Christ.

TS: In Memphis, wasn't it?

CW: In Memphis. However, there was a church that was started in Hope, Arkansas at that time, which is still considered Hempstead County. My great-grandfather Jacob Walker was there at that time. And it is said that he met C. H. Mason and was part of the founding church in Hope, Arkansas. They are saying that my great-grandfather, Jacob Walker, was one of the founders of that particular church.

TS: Isn't there a Bill Clinton connection to Hope, Arkansas?

CW: Bill Clinton was [born] there. I did a little research when I entered into my public ministry to be a preacher, and I was tracing all of that. I did find something in the archives that had Jacob Walker connected to a Church of God in Christ church in Hope, Arkansas. If that is indeed still on record, that was my great-grandfather who walked with C. H. Mason at that time.

TS: So, Jacob is father of Hosea?

CW: He is father of Hosea. Hosea had a twin brother named Joel who died at birth. Hosea is my grandfather. As a child, I don't remember him much because I wasn't around him much. But he was also a musician. I have a family of musicians.

TS: What kind of music? Blues or spirituals or ...

CW: They played blues and gospel. His particular forte was the guitar. A lot of his children, including my father, were and are musicians, if not all of them. And the guitar is the instrument of choice. Of course, myself, I play instruments as well. So, it has come down through the generations. But yes, Hosea was one of the sons of Jacob Walker, who is my grandfather. Hosea was a barber.

TS: And where was he located?

CW: He was located also in Hugo, Oklahoma. That's where they all settled, Hugo, Fort Towson, McAlester, that whole southeastern corner of Oklahoma.

TS: Now, by the time that Hosea comes along ... when was he born, approximately?

CW: Oh, wow. You're making me do some...

TS: Well, we're going to talk about the Tulsa Massacre in a few minutes, which was 1921. He was born long before that, I guess.

CW: He had to be. My dad is about 80 now. So...

TS: So, 80 would be back to 1942.

CW: Something like that, I think. His dad was in his twenties when he had him. So, it is somewhere around that time that he was born, yes. I've heard the stories of some of them being there and leaving before it got out of hand. I can't be accurate with that, but if he had my dad in his twenties, then he was definitely born in the 'teens or '20s

TS: Did he own his own barber shop?

CW: He actually did his barbering on the back porch of the house. They had the wraparound porches in the houses in those days, and he had his own barber chair and all of that. He used a straight razor. He was very, very accurate with his straight razor. And nobody bothered him because he was very accurate with his straight razor.

TS: Well, now we had barbers in Marietta who were African American, and all their customers were white. What was his story? Black customers or...

CW: From what I understand, it was mostly Black customers. But he was different. He had a different approach to religion, I would say. His father was a preacher, but then he didn't really aspire to be a preacher or to follow any of the tenets, because he was more of a realist, and he saw things that didn't add up, so to speak. One instance is a story that I heard. My dad shared with me, one time they were walking in town to get food at the general store or whatever. And in between the alley of the store and another building was a Black person hanging from a rope. He walks by and sees it. And then there are people

coming in the other direction that were, quote, unquote, Christians. And his response was, “Okay, if there’s a God that all of you are serving, then why is this happening to our people? Why is He allowing this?”

TS: Good question.

CW: And he’s saying, “I can’t deal with this. If this is what your God allows, then I don’t want anything to do with Him.” So, he had a different approach and he, in his own way, dealt with what he had to deal with.

TS: There’s a historian by the name of Eugene Genovese, who wrote a lot about slavery. I think his most famous book, maybe, is *Roll, Jordan, Roll [The World the Slaves Made (New York: Random House, 1972, 1974)]*. Genovese makes the argument that Christianity had a strong appeal to enslaved people precisely because they understood how radical the message was. It was going through regardless of what white preachers may say—that we’re all created equal in the eyes of God, we’re all created in the image of God. And the message to them, I guess, made them realize they were somebody in a way that slavery told them the opposite.

CW: Sure.

TS: I’m wondering what you would think about that and the Black church over the years?

CW: I think it has some validity. I can agree with it to a certain extent, but I think a lot of what I believe and have gathered through reading and historical research and taking a deep dive into some of it, was the idea of the enslaved people reading about the idea of escaping or the escapism or being set free, so to speak. That is always an encouraging message, being able to think about one day being free. And if you’re hearing the story of Moses, and how the people were set free, and it was by God’s doing, and only God could have done it, that would inspire someone that’s enslaved. If God can do it for [the Israelites], he can do it for us. And so, my idea is that a lot of the slaves had that idea, that understanding. Of course, coming from where they came from in Africa, they had a God; they had a religion.

TS: Which was suppressed when they got here.

CW: Absolutely. And through the Middle Passage, if you made it, you knew who God was. If you made it, you knew who God was, right? And for them to make it, they had to be strong.

TS: I can’t imagine what they went through.

CW: Oh, they had to be strong and resilient and all of that. We can go through all the adjectives and adverbs we can find. But the key thing is that we made it and we’re still making it.

TS: There's a thesis that *Amazing Grace*, despite being written by a former slave trader, who converted later, conveys that sense of the Middle Passage. You can almost feel the groaning in the hymn.

CW: Yes, and it still resonates even today. Yes, it does.

TS: *Amazing Grace* may have been written by a white person, but it came out of the experience of the Middle Passage.

CW: Oh, absolutely. When you look at even in modern times, what happened in South Carolina when the young fella came in and shot up the Bible study.

TS: Mother Emanuel [AME Church, Charleston, South Carolina, site of a mass shooting in 2015].

CW: Mother Emanuel. And then here comes the president at that time, Barack Obama [to deliver a eulogy nine days later], and he stands up, known not to be a singer at all, but what song does he sing? *Amazing Grace*. And it resonated and made an impact. Even till this day it still does make an impact. So, that song, rightfully, as you have stated, written by someone that was not Black, but still resonates with the Black community.

TS: Barack Obama didn't have a chance. He was raised a white mother and white grandparents.

CW: Yes, but he knew what to sing when he went to Mother Emanuel.

TS: He did. He did. Okay, we've talked about Hosea. Let's talk about your father now.

CW: My father, interesting man. Still with us, still living. Born and raised in Oklahoma and starts out as a blues singer. He and his brothers form a band called the Rockin' Robins. It's archived. You can find it. He has a brother named Jasper, brother named Bo, and his other brother, James. James Walker is in the Blues Hall of Fame. He traveled; Ike and Tina Turner Revue and all of that. But they formed a band as young men, and they traveled the country as the Rockin' Robins. My dad played the saxophone at that time.

TS: *Rockin' Robin* is a song, isn't it? [Recorded by Bobby Day (1958); written by Leon Rene under the pseudonym Jimmie Thomas]

CW: Right. Right. And they traveled and played their music and sang and did all of that. And my dad got called to Vietnam—went to Vietnam, served, came back.

TS: "Called" sounds like being called to the ministry. You're talking about getting drafted?

CW: Drafted, right. Got drafted into the army and did a tour or two in Vietnam.

TS: More than one?

CW: I'm not certain of how many, but I just know he went and came back different. You know what I mean? I was born in 1970.

TS: So, he was back by then.

CW: He was probably back by then. And when he came back, he immediately went into ministry. So, Vietnam had an impact on him.

TS: Before we skip by it, the Tulsa Massacre fits into your family history.

CW: Okay. There is an Andrew [Cheesten] Jackson that's a cousin that was a Black physician; he stems from the Isom Jackson line. He was a physician in Tulsa, in the Greenwood District [popularly known as the Black Wall Street]. There's an intersection there, Greenwood, Archer, and Pine [Streets]—the way it all connects there. In that whole area, he was the one physician. He was a general practitioner, but he was killed in the massacre. He was very successful.

TS: Do you know how that happened?

CW: Don't know how he was killed. Just knowing that it's recorded that Andrew Jackson was the physician in our family, and he was killed.¹ There are a few descendants still living, but none of our family that are still living. But there was Andrew Jackson. There could be more, but that is the only one that I have had told to me that was a direct descendant from our family. But that whole area is like a corridor when you come from the southeast region of Oklahoma. There is a corridor that leads up from Fort Towson, Hugo, Idabel. You come up through McAlester. Then you hit Muskogee, and you come up through Muskogee. Now you're in Broken Arrow. Now you're in Tulsa. So, there was a corridor of how they traveled from north to south to hit the big cities and to do whatever, commerce, marketplace, whatever they did. That area was called Little Africa. It was the original name of it because of the influx, and the population was heavily Black. But Andrew Jackson was a general practitioner [and surgeon]. He was a physician and was the known physician in that area. And that area was self-contained. Their dollar circulated for months before it even left the area. So, they were self-contained, right? And they were all wealthy pretty much. My dad was sharing with me that there are

¹ Editor's note: Dr. Jackson had spent most of the night caring for the wounded at Booker T. Washington Hospital. Early in the morning he was walking home. Unfortunately, gangs of angry white men were roaming the streets. One of Dr. Jackson's neighbors, Judge John Oliphant, testified that Jackson walked toward him with his hands raised, saying, "I want to go with you." But a mob of seven armed men intervened and shot him multiple times. He bled to death without receiving medical attention. He was 42 years old. A detailed account of his life can be founded on "The Victory of Greenwood" website (<https://thevictoryofgreenwood.com>); and in chapter 4, "Dr. A. C. Jackson," of the recently published book by Carlos Moreno, *The Victory of Greenwood* (Tulsa: Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2021).

several family members, but that's the only one in depth that I do know was Andrew Jackson. Of course, he's named after former president Andrew Jackson.

TS: That period after World War I was really a horrible period. I know there was a riot in Chicago in 1919, right after the war, from just a kid that was out floating in the lake and went across an imaginary line between Black and white sections, and [white] people went berserk [and stoned him until he drowned]. There were riots all over the country

CW: Yes. Yes.

TS: It was a bad time.

CW: Yes, it was a bad time.

TS: Okay. So, your father becomes a Baptist minister, doesn't he?

CW: He's a Baptist preacher, yes

TS: Is he still preaching today?

CW: Still preaching today. He was licensed and ordained by the late, great E. R. Neal, the founding pastor of the Greater Mount Olive Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. By this time, my dad is there, and he gets licensed and ordained by E. R. Neal, and he's ministering and takes a job doing civil service in Ogden, Utah, the Salt Lake City, Ogden area.

TS: Long way away.

CW: There's an Air Force base there. Yes. He is there, and he starts some churches while he's there in an area called Clearfield. And he starts another one in Layton, the True Vine Baptist Church. So, he's there well over twenty years maybe until he retires from civil service.

TS: Now, where did you grow up?

CW: Grew up in Oklahoma City. And growing up in Oklahoma City was interesting to say the least. My mom and my father divorced, but I would visit often there. He preaches out maybe two to three churches. When I say the term preaches out, in our community they use that term "preach out" to mean they founded it. They were the founder of that church. So, he does that in Utah. Then my aunt gets sick, my grandmother's sister, Velte's sister. He moves back to Oklahoma and starts caring for them in their old age. Then he's called to a church in Oklahoma, the New Bethel Baptist Church, of which he's still pastor to this day.

TS: And what about your mother?

CW: Now my mom's a nurse. She's retired at this time. But born and raised in Oklahoma City. Her parents were sharecroppers from Mississippi, a town called Montpelier, Mississippi, right outside of Jackson. But they were sharecroppers there in Mississippi. My mother's mother, Charlie Ann Jones, seventh grade education, but had more mink coats in her closet than the law allows. She found ways to be productive, and she found ways to acquire. And it was all legal, but you wouldn't know that she would have acquired what she acquired until you sat down and had a conversation with her.

She taught me how to plant a seed and to nurture it and watch it grow. I didn't know it then as a little child; in her backyard, she was teaching me the laws of sowing and reaping which I ended up using in my preaching ministry. Right? But I learned it from my grandmother and my grandfather—how to break up the fallow ground and plant the seed and cover it, water it, and pick the weeds out from around it occasionally when it starts to grow. The whole process—I learned that from her. She would sit on the porch with me and share stories of how it was when she was a child growing up in Mississippi. But that's my mother's side. That's another whole interview there, man. So, I'm catching the whole slavery [experience] from the stories of enslaved grandparents and great-grandparents from both sides. As unique as the concept of slavery was, from different sides of the family I'm getting different views of how slavery was. But that's another interview that is going to take some more time to take a deep dive with that.

TS: Well, we'll maybe have to do another interview.

CW: Maybe we'll do that. Yes. So, my father is a Baptist preacher to this day.

TS: And Vietnam is important in his story.

CW: It's in the story, yes.

TS: Why don't you talk about you're [childhood] in Oklahoma, going through school and how did you get into the military?

CW: I did very well in high school, was an athlete, and had several scholarships to play ball—a lot of different schools, the University of Hawaii, University of Memphis (Memphis State), North Texas State, Oklahoma State University, all these colleges. I played a summer league for the AAU [Amateur Athletic Union], right? And I also played for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I traveled the country during the summer with summer camps, with Fellowship of Christian Athletes. That summer after my senior year of high school, I traveled extensively with a lot of basketball camps of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I got back, and the time was winding up to sign letters of intent for scholarships for different colleges.

TS: For basketball?

CW: For basketball, exactly. I made all city, all state, all of that. It's all archived. You can pull it up. I went to Midwest City High School [Midwest City, Oklahoma] and got back

a little late in the summertime for school to start. I hadn't made a decision of where I wanted to go to college. It was important, but I thought I had time, right?

TS: Right. Well, not everybody's ready at age eighteen to go to college.

CW: Right. I was though because I wanted to play ball. I wanted to do all of that. A lot of the colleges that were [NCAA] Division 1 that I really desired to go to had already filled all scholarship slots. So, they were like, "Yes, you can still come on. You'll be red shirted though for a year. You can still practice with the team and do all that and travel." I was like, "Nah, man, I want to play." So, I ended up signing with a junior college for that one year and broke my ankle.

TS: Oh, no.

CW: Game six. Broke it in two places. I was out for the rest of the season.

TS: Which college did you go to?

CW: It was Rose State Junior College [Midwest City, Oklahoma]. Out for the rest of the year. I was an econ major at the time. The school year had ended, and I was trying to make some decisions in life because I felt like, "I don't know if I'll ever play at that level again." Mentally, I don't believe I was ready because psychologically I was thinking, "Oh, if I jump high again, I'm going to come down and break the ankle again." I couldn't get past that.

TS: Is that how you did it—going up for a rebound and came down [awkwardly]?

CW: Yes, I went up and blocked a guy's shot, and I landed on someone's foot, and it turned. I didn't land on anything flat. It just turned, and you could hear it crack across the gym. But I joined the Navy after I got healed up. I wanted to do something with my life, and I needed to do something fast. And I said, "I'll join the military." I joined the United States Navy and became a combat medic. So, I served with the Marine Corps as well. I did that and went to [Operation] Desert Storm [from August 2, 1990, to February 28, 1991, in response to the Iraqi invasion of neighboring Kuwait].

TS: Okay. So, we're in the 1990s now.

CW: Yes, the early '90s. So, I go. My name comes up, my billet number comes up, combat medic. They first called me in. I was going to Panama at first because around that same time was that whole [Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio] Noriega/Contra/Sandinista thing. That was going to be my first deployment.² And then whatever happened with

² Editor's note: On December 20, 1989, President George H. W. Bush ordered an invasion of Panama to remove Noriega from power. He surrendered ten days later (January 3, 1990) and was sent to a prison in the United States. The Contras were a U.S.-backed rebel group in opposition to a Marxist inspired Sandinista Junta that controlled Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990.

that, maybe about three weeks later, they changed. They said, “No, you’re not going to Panama. Something else is brewing up in the Middle East. That’s where you’re going, to Iraq and Kuwait.” So, I went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and the Marine Corps base there, the 2nd Marine Division. I trained there for about eight weeks with the Marine Corps unit, got shipped out to Desert Storm, and we got there in the holiday season. It must have been October or November of 1990. And then I got injured there.

TS: And that was when Iraq went into Kuwait [on August 2].

CW: So, we’re there, locked and loaded and ready to go. And we’re there. And I get injured there, and then I get shipped out.

TS: How did you get injured?

CW: It’s a different story.

TS: Okay.

CW: Yes. So, I....

TS: You don’t want to talk about it?

CW: No.

TS: Okay. But you got injured?

CW: Injured there and was shipped out to Italy. It was a Naval Hospital in Sigonella, Italy. The intent was to do the surgery, and they were going to send me to the USNS *Mercy*. It was a hospital ship, the USNS *Mercy*, and there was a [sister ship] USNS *Comfort*. They were the two ships. The USNS *Mercy* was there in the Gulf, but at that time it had gotten real hot and heavy with artillery. So, they had to move the hospital ships further off the coast, out of the way. And so, I couldn’t go there from Italy. So, they ended up sending me to Germany.

TS: And I guess the hot and heavy of the war, as I look it up, was January 17, 1991, through February of 1991.

CW: That’s it. I ended up getting shipped back. I was in Germany for a while. And then I got shipped back from Germany to the continental U.S. to Andrews Air Force Base and then ultimately to Bethesda Naval Hospital. I ended up making my way there, somewhere around May of ’91. I was at the Bethesda Naval Hospital in Annapolis, Maryland, and I’ve had several surgeries there. The Bethesda Naval Hospital is considered the elite hospital for the military. That’s where they send the presidents, to Bethesda Naval. So, that’s where I was for some time until I was discharged out of the military in 1994. I had the surgery, so, they couldn’t release me. In essence, I was trying to get myself back to

full duty because I wanted to stay in, right? But I just couldn't, with all the surgeries that I continued to have, just so that I could walk properly.

TS: Sure. So, you're there for three years?

CW: Yes, at least.

TS: Wow.

CW: Then ultimately received a medical discharge from the United States Navy. I leave the military, and now I'm a veteran and young veteran. I'm 23 or 24 years old at the time. And I'm on my way back home to Oklahoma. I stopped in Georgia on my way back home. I had a cousin that was attending Clark Atlanta University at the time. I called him because I stop and get gas. I'm in a Hertz/Penske/U-Haul truck or whatever, with all my stuff in it, and I stop somewhere in Atlanta and pull off to get gas. I call him because at that time it's payphones, right? So, I'm putting money in the payphone, and I'm calling him, and I say, "Hey, I'm just passing through." That is my cousin Grover, named after my father, whose name is Grover Cleveland Walker, who was named after the president, Grover Cleveland. So, my cousin was living in Atlanta at the time. He was Grover, but he wasn't Grover Cleveland. He's Grover Marvell Walker.

TS: Okay.

CW: So, he's at Clark Atlanta at the time. I call him. I said, "I'm passing through, man. Just passing through." He says, "Well, where are you at?" I say, "I'm on such and such street." He says, "Stay right there. I'll be there." So, he meets me, and we go have some chicken wings or something. That was in '94 in May, and that May of 1994 has turned into right now, July 2022.

TS: Is that right? And you never left?

CW: Never left. So, I turned in the truck and started my life.

TS: What made you want to stay?

CW: I think it was beyond me. What I mean by that is my cousins and I had a pact somewhat before we left Oklahoma that we would all go to HBCUs and do all of that. His older sister, Aretha Walker, was the brains behind all of it. She would fill out all of the paperwork to get admitted into the colleges. She's a graduate of Wiley College in [Marshall] Texas with *The Great Debaters*, that [2007] movie Denzel Washington [directed and starred about the Wiley debate team defeating the reigning national champions in the 1930s]. So, she went to Wiley. He went to Clark Atlanta. He has a younger brother named Napoleon who goes to Tuskegee. So, I'm saying, "Okay, I'm going to go to a HBCU." But then I got sidetracked with athletics, and then I ended up joining the military. But I ended up staying because I looked at Atlanta and I said, "If

there's ever a place where I want to go to an HBCU, it should be here in Atlanta. There's four or five of them right here in this state."

TS: Sure.

CW: You've got Morehouse, Morris Brown, Clark, Spelman, ITC [Interdenominational Theological Center], all these HBCUs. So, we begin to talk about education and some other things. A lot of it too was mainly that, "Okay, I did the whole military thing. What am I going back to Oklahoma for? You've already left home. What are you going back to?"

TS: Live with Mama.

CW: Right, right. So, it stuck with me, that thought, those questions that he asked, and it made sense to continue to live my life out and to live outside of the bounds of Oklahoma.

TS: You'd left home, and...

CW: I'd left home already, so, why am I going back to live? Maybe to retire, but not to go back to try to make a living.

TS: So, you're thinking, "I'm going to go to one of these colleges?"

CW: Morehouse. Went to Morehouse.

TS: That's a good school.

CW: Yes, liberal arts school. I put it to you this way. When I look at my high school, Midwest City High School, I look at Morehouse College, I look at the United States Navy, and I look at all of those institutions combined and how it has molded me into the person that I am today in ministry. I've been afforded a great opportunity to preach and pastor. So, I enter into ministry, right? I enter into ministry in 1994 when I got out of the Navy. So, when I got out, the thoughts were there, the call—I could hear the call so to speak.

TS: Well, you probably did a whole lot of thinking during those three years while you were recuperating.

CW: Yes. Yes. Because I had a lot of time to recoup. A lot of time. And my dad had told me at one time, he says, "Don't become a preacher just because I'm a preacher." And he encouraged me even not to get in the military. He says, "Don't do it." Maybe it was because of his experience in Vietnam and all of that. Then my mindset was, "Oh, no war is going to happen, man. War, that's things of the past, you know?" And the first year I'm in, 1989, I'm right smack dab in the middle of a war. In 1994 I'm out. I'm contemplating ministry now. I'm looking at it, and I'm saying, "This is something. I already know the rudiments of preaching."

TS: Sure.

CW: I already understand the concept of sermon preparation because I've watched my dad, and I've listened to him, studied him. I've read his messages. To this day, I still read messages that he has written from 1972, 1973, and they're still relevant today. And I enter into my ministry, accept the call into ministry. I'm traveling, and I'm preaching around the world. I'm an evangelist, right? I get licensed and ordained at Wings of Faith Church. At that time, it was Wings of Faith Baptist Church under the leadership of Bishop Dreyfus C. Smith. He licenses and ordains me in 1995, 1996.

TS: This is in Atlanta?

CW: In Atlanta 1995, 1996.

TS: And you were still going to Morehouse?

CW: No, I don't get to Morehouse until the 2000s, but I'm preaching. I am an evangelist.

TS: How do you travel around the world? What pays the bills?

CW: Interesting. Mind you, I'm a single man at this time. I have no wife. I have no children. So, I have no responsibilities, really. I'm working for Marriott at the time. Now, this is the interesting thing that has happened in my life, and I think it's noteworthy. All of my life I've had people say, "Man, you're the luckiest man in the world. How do you get this? How do you acquire that? Man, you're so lucky. Every time I turn around, man, it's you getting this, you're getting that." I've grown to know that it's called the favor of God.

TS: Okay.

CW: As a child, my mom would tell me that. I remember it just vaguely, but the kids would sit on our front porch and wait on me to come outside. I vaguely remember it, but my mom tells this story to this day that they would come and wait on me. She knew I was a natural born leader even then because they would wait on the porch for me to come outside and would say, "What are we going to do today? Where are we going today?" They would wait on me for that. With these leadership skills, I was always out in front. I was always leading. I was always pointing and saying, "Go and do that."

But as I entered into ministry, and I began to travel, I worked for Marriott at the time. I get out of the military. I'm working for Marriott. God had given me favor—I would say that—with upper-level management, and they promoted me very quickly. I came in doing security. Anybody that's got out of the military can work anywhere doing security. So, I'm doing security for Marriott at the time, and then they promote me very quickly. I had friends that were from all over. In the military you're connected to different people. So, I started attending the church, and I started meeting other people, and one thing led to another. This one had a cousin that was from Kansas; this one has a cousin from North

Carolina. “Oh, my cousin—they’ll let you come preach. I’ll call them.” That’s how it happened.

I knew someone from Trinidad and Tobago. “Oh, I need to call my bishop. My bishop needs to hear you preach.” They call their bishop where they grew up, in Trinidad, and they pay for the ticket. They pay for the hotel the whole time I’m there. And I’m preaching in Trinidad and Tobago for ten days, and Jamaica and Cayman [Islands] and all these places. So, I get this opportunity to preach, and I’m traveling, and I’m doing mission work and all of that. I’m still in my twenties. Think about this now. I’m still in my twenties, man. I’m still a youngster, still trying to figure life out. And so, I’m doing all of this preaching. Then I get called into the pastorate, which is something totally different from being an evangelist. So, now I’m over the flock of people. So, this is where Ponders comes in. This is where we’re going.

TS: I thought that was what you were leading up to. Tell that story. First, talk about visiting that church for the first time and the history of the whole area where the Ponders family once had a plantation.

CW: I’ll put it to you this way. I finished a service. I was having church at the hotel where I worked.

TS: Oh, the Marriott.

CW: The Marriott. The manager said, “I see what you’re doing. You don’t have to pay for this. Just do what you’re doing for God. Don’t even worry about it.” So, I used the ballroom at the Marriott.

TS: So, you had a free ballroom.

CW: You’re the luckiest guy in the world, right?

TS: Yes.

CW: So, I’m using the ballroom for free, and people are coming. But I lived in Smyrna at the time. So, I’m traveling from Smyrna all the way down to the airport, past the airport, and I’m having church. So, there’s a disconnect.

TS: And why are you living in Smyrna?

CW: I lived in College Park at first, was working for Marriott. Then I moved to Smyrna. I get married, meet my wife, and we can’t live in a little apartment but for so long. So, we get us a house in Smyrna. She’s from Cobb County, born and raised, so we moved into familiar territory for her. I’m not from Georgia, so it didn’t matter where I lived as long as I was with her.

TS: So, this is Katavah?

CW: Katavah. I meet Katavah at church. We meet at a church, and when I saw her and she saw me, that was it. Eight months later, we get married. That was twenty-two years ago, and we've been married ever since. We get married in 2000. I'm preaching, and I meet her, and so I'm called into the pastorate. She's a great singer. She's anointed to sing. She comes from a church background as well. Her father's a preacher.

TS: Which church?

CW: Church of God in Christ. So, there's a link with that.

TS: In Cobb County I know the Greater Community Church of God in Christ in Marietta. Where did her father preach?

CW: She was in Emmanuel Church of God in Christ. They're no longer in existence, but that was her father's church.

TS: That was in Smyrna?

CW: No, that was in Marietta off Canton Road at the time. So, I meet her, and it's almost like a perfect setup because she knows how all of this works, in terms of, I'm a pastor. She has been in a pastor's house, and she knows, "Hey, I'm marrying a preacher, so I already know what to do."

TS: So, it's time to stop being an evangelist and settle down to a church.

CW: So, now I'm a pastor. I start this church with going back and forth to the airport, and I'm frustrated one Sunday morning. We have an early service. Our service was very early, and then we would leave, and we'd go back home to Smyrna. But that particular day, I'm frustrated because I'm like, "We're driving all of this back and forth and back and forth." I go into prayer, and I say, "God, what is it that you would have me to do? Where would you have me to be in this pastoring?" He says, "I've called you to this area here in Cobb County. This is where I want you to do the work." So, I said, "Okay, I need to find a church in this area." So, I go to Smyrna. I'm driving around. and I pull into this park. This is exactly how it happens. I pull into the park. I get out the car. I'm walking around the park, and I'm praying.

I'm asking God, and with tears in my eyes, I'm saying, "God, I need you to help me. You called me to pastor. I didn't call myself. You called me to do this work. So, I need somewhere to pastor these people because the hotel is not going to last forever for what you're calling me to do." He says, "Okay, get in the car. Put it in reverse. Pull out; put it in drive." Exactly like this. I'm hearing it, and He says, "Now, look up." And there's a church right there in front of me. Never noticed it. It was directly across the street from the park. He says, "Now, pull in there and go in." I pull in there, and I go in. I walk in the church. There are maybe eight or ten people there, max. They're all Caucasian.

I go to the front of the church, and I sit down. I'm listening to a guy. I think he's teaching a Sunday school lesson or something. He has a Sunday school book. And they finish. So, he asked me some questions. I introduced myself, and I told him who I was. I said, "I'm Christopher Walker. I'm a preacher." And he was like, "Oh, wow, you're a preacher?" I was like, "Yes." And then he says, "Wow." And they say, "We don't have a pastor." I was looking around like, "Okay." My intent was just to use the facility for the church I had already created and founded. He came to me. He says, "Can I have your number?" And I said, "Sure, you can have my number." Gave him my number. He says, "We're going to have a meeting in a couple of weeks. I want to see if you can come to the meeting."

I was like, "Okay, sure." So, he calls me. He says, "Bring your wife." So, I brought my wife to the meeting. They're having this meeting, and they're asking all these questions, and they're voting on some things, and it was just totally irrelevant to me because it was church business. But I'm like, "I'm included in on this. Why does he want me here for this?" Then all of a sudden, he says, "Okay, we now are going to vote in the new pastor of this church." So, by this time my ears are perked up. He says, "We want to vote in Pastor Christopher Walker as the new pastor of Ponders Avenue Baptist Church. All in favor, say aye."

All of them raised their hand. I was like, "Oh, wow." I looked at my wife; I said, "Do you see what just happened? Can you believe this?" So, I sat there, and I waited. They voted me in as the pastor. I had preached there, I think, a week prior. They had asked me to preach, and I preached Matthew 28[:19], "Go ye therefore, [and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost]". That was the message, "go." I guess that message inspired them to make me the pastor. So, I was voted as the pastor after that.

TS: Sounds like that sermon was your trial to see how you could do.

CW: Probably what it was, probably. But I was voted in that night. [The church] started growing rapidly, very fast. People were coming from everywhere.

TS: Do you know how unique this is? An all-white church calling you to be a pastor?

CW: Yes, that's very unique. And they turn everything over. That's when I start doing a deep dive in the history of that church.

TS: It's called Ponders Avenue Baptist, but it's on Bank Street and Pinehill [Drive].

CW: It's on Bank Street and Pinehill in Smyrna, Georgia.

TS: So, they'd already moved out of Atlanta?

CW: They moved out of Atlanta, off Ponders Avenue in Atlanta.

TS: But they still called themselves Ponders Avenue Baptist?

CW: Ponders Avenue Baptist Church, exactly.

TS: Okay. So, you're growing by leaps and bounds.

CW: Yes, and I started taking a deep dive in the history of the church, how it was founded, all of that. I can't remember who founded it in particular, but I do know that there were direct links to Ephraim [G.] Ponder, who was the slave master who had the Ponder plantation in Atlanta. He called it the Ponder House, but it was the Ponder plantation. He had a plantation. He had enslaved people on his plantation.

TS: Yes, I did a little research on my own the other day. The Georgia Archives website [Virtual Vault] has a picture of The Ponder house after it had been shelled [by Union artillery in 1864] during the Civil War. The photo was taken by a famous photographer named George N. Barnard, who took a lot of pictures of the Atlanta campaign from the Union side. The caption under the photo said that there were 65 enslaved people at the Ponder plantation prior to the Civil War, many of them skilled mechanics. You might tell about Henry [Oddian] Flipper [1856-1940].

CW: Yes. Henry Flipper was a descendant of an enslaved mom and dad [Isabella and Festus Flipper] that were enslaved on that plantation. Henry Flipper later was accepted to the United States Military Academy at West Point and [in 1877] was the first African American graduate from West Point. He came from that plantation, of the Ponder plantation.³ When you look at the [church] history, they never allowed an African American to preach at that particular church, let alone be the pastor. So, I made history as the first African American to actually preach in the Ponders Avenue Baptist Church, and then later became the first African American to ever pastor Ponders Avenue Baptist Church.

TS: But as long as the church was in Atlanta, no African American preachers.

CW: None.

TS: Or African American members either, I think you said?

³ Editor's note: For information on the distinguished career of Henry Flipper, see the entry by Susan Copeland entitled "Henry O. Flipper" in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (originally published 2004) and Flipper's memoirs, published posthumously in 1963 under the title *Negro Frontiersman: The Western Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper*. Flipper had to overcome blatant racism at West Point and throughout his career. West Point now gives an award in his honor to a graduating senior who shows "the highest qualities of leadership, self-discipline, and perseverance in the face of unusual difficulties while a cadet."

CW: No members, yes. It was completely segregated.

TS: Do you know why they moved to Smyrna from Atlanta?

CW: From what I'm reading, it was a lot of urban renewal. HUD had come in, government, the [United States Department of] Housing and Urban Development. All of that started taking the forefront of development in Atlanta at that time, and they migrated to Smyrna. As you know, at that particular time, Smyrna, in the 1950s and 1960s was the hub for white supremacy and the KKK and all of that. So, maybe they felt comfortable to migrate there.

TS: Because it was a white church.

CW: It was a white church. It would fit. That's what I've gathered just through reading the history of it. They owned quite a bit of land, and they ended up selling a lot of it over time.

TS: Land in Smyrna or land in Atlanta?

CW: In Smyrna

TS: Other than the Flippers, is there anything else about the descendants of the enslaved people at Ponder plantation?

CW: No, I haven't taken a deep dive into that. That's one of the things I desire to do, is to really take a deep dive and try to gather more historical content as it involves them because I know there's some more, rich history that's involved with that. But I did remember reading that the slave masters themselves, Ephraim and his brother, set up in the East Point area, the BuggyWorks. They made buggies, the carriages, and they were famous for that. Of course, probably the slaves were making all of that stuff for them, but they sold them. They had a shop where they sold buggies.

Until this day, there is a BuggyWorks in East Point, and it's from them. You can see that's documented as well. Even to this day, that same area is like an office complex now. I think it's still named BuggyWorks, but they're not making buggies over there anymore, of course. But I think it's an office tech complex or something like that in East Point, right in the heart of Main Street [East Point Main Street Historic District, 1513 East Cleveland Avenue], East Point, Georgia.

TS: Henry Flipper's father was a skilled craftsman. Festus Flipper opened a shoe shop on Decatur Street after the Civil War and another son, Joseph [Simeon] Flipper [1859-1944], was president of Morris Brown College in Atlanta [from 1905 to 1908] and was consecrated as a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church [on May 20, 1908]

CW: Look at that! Ain't that amazing?

TS: It is.

CW: The history of that plantation, I know it goes a whole lot deeper, but there's some other archival information that goes back to even General Sherman visiting and having dinner there.

TS: Must have been after it was shelled.

CW: Yes. A few people that were sharing some of the history with me about that said he'd come through there.

TS: Oh, so people in the church were aware of that history?

CW: Yes. There were a few older people there in their early to mid '80s. I only had a few conversations with them about that. I don't know if it made for a touchy subject for them maybe. I was just fishing for information, but they may have felt a little uncomfortable sharing enslaved history to an African American pastor. I don't know if they felt comfortable with sharing it, so they didn't really go into any details with a lot of it.

TS: Now Ponder—at least on the website, it's spelled without an "s," but you were pronouncing it with an "s." Ponders Avenue. Did the church itself have an "s" at the end—Ponders Avenue Baptist Church?

CW: It had an "s". But I do believe his name was Ponder; Ephraim was his first name.

TS: So, maybe the Ponders Avenue Baptist should have had a possessive in there, Ponder's Avenue Baptist.

CW: Right, right.

TS: So, it was a Baptist church.

CW: It was a Baptist church.

TS: But it didn't stay a Baptist church.

CW: Didn't stay a Baptist church.

TS: Tell a little about the history. You were talking about it growing by leaps and bounds.

CW: Yes, it was growing, and people were coming from everywhere.

TS: Were the new people mainly Black or mainly white?

CW: They were Black.

TS: So, the congregation suddenly becomes very diverse, and then overwhelmingly African American.

CW: Yes, absolutely.

TS: And what happens to the white members at that time?

CW: At that time, I remember one of the deacons made a statement about leaving, but he didn't go into depth. It was more of, "Okay, I'm leaving now." And that was it. I didn't hear anything else. Numbers were changed and all that. There were some things that were happening that I could tell brought some uncomfortableness because, you have to be mindful that this church was, I don't want to say predominantly white; it was all white.

TS: When you became the pastor?

CW: When I became the pastor. So, I don't know what they thought.

TS: What they expected you to do?

CW: Right. Who was going to come in the doors after I became the pastor? So, all African Americans came into the congregation. Then, of course, they [the white members] were outnumbered, so to speak. Maybe that was the feeling: "We're outnumbered now; we have no voice." I'm just speculating; I don't know. But they called a meeting. This is maybe eight or nine months into the pastorate. I get to the meeting, and it's only two people that showed up for the meeting. They called me and said, "We want to have a meeting." So, I'm thinking...

TS: But only two people showed up?

CW: Only two people showed up. They had a box. Lights were out. Only one light was on. I was like, "What is this?" Now, mind you, I had started getting some strange calls during this time, and a lot of this I didn't share with the congregation.

TS: They were threatening calls?

CW: Yes, some of them were threatening calls, using the N word and all of that.

TS: My goodness.

CW: Don't know who it was. Didn't bother to trace them or start [an investigation] and all that. Wasn't into all of that. But it was maybe some scare tactics. I don't know.

TS: We're talking what year now, late 1990s?

CW: We're talking 2000s.

TS: Wow.

CW: We're in the 2000s, and I'm getting these calls. So, finally, I get a call saying we need to have a meeting. So, I'm having a meeting. I'm there, and two people show up, a man and a woman. They were part of the church, and they were white. They were two of the original members. They said, "It looks like you know what you're doing. It looks like you have a handle on this. The church is growing. You're doing well. Here's everything." And they had a box. It was the bank book, the deed, the insurance papers, everything.

TS: They're leaving, and they're leaving all the records with you?

CW: They left everything with me. And that was it.

TS: So, no more white members?

CW: We still had a couple, but it wasn't from that group. So, that original group is no longer there.

TS: That's the strangest story! The whole thing.

CW: Ain't it crazy?

TS: What did they expect?

CW: Here's even the stranger part. Till this day, I don't know where they are and how to find them. My dad made a statement one time. He said, "There's a scripture in the Bible, son. I want you to find it." He says, "Be careful how you entertain strangers because they can be angels unaware." It's in the Bible. It's there. And it has stuck with me, that one scripture, because till this day, I don't know where they are.

TS: You may have been the angel that walked in the door.

CW: Well, they may have been the angels that gave me the church.

TS: Yes, exactly. It's amazing that you can't find them anymore.

CW: I can't find them anymore.

TS: But they held the deeds and so on.

CW: We were there, and we begin to grow, and it's no longer a Baptist church.

TS: How long did it take before you changed the style of worship? I know the Black churches that I've been in have a significantly different style of worship. They go longer

for one thing. So, how long did it take before you made it more like a traditional African American church service?

CW: Not long.

TS: I wouldn't think so.

CW: We were already doing it while they [the white original members] were there. Now, the message was the same. It's the music and the charisma; all of that is what makes the service different.

TS: They probably weren't ready for a guitar.

CW: They weren't ready for the guitar and the organ and the drums because they didn't even have drums in the church when I got there. We added drums.

TS: Most white churches don't.

CW: So, here comes the drums, here comes the guitar, here comes the bass guitar, here comes to organ, here comes the keyboard, which is generating a totally different sound. You're talking space age type sounds coming out of there.

TS: I've got your scripture.

CW: Is it in Hebrews somewhere?

TS: You're exactly right. Hebrew, 13th chapter, second verse. If you can go with the New International Version, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

CW: There you go.

TS: Hebrews 13:2; let's see, King James Bible, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

CW: There you go. So, we're doing that, and we're doing ministry, and we're growing, and God blesses us. And even to this day I should say, God is still blessing us. We're talking twenty-nine years preaching, and we're looking at twenty years of pastoring now. So, I just didn't start doing this at 7:30 last night.

TS: No, I understand. When did the threatening calls stop? Or did they?

CW: They stopped. Yes, they did stop. They only lasted maybe about a month or two. The calls would come through late at night, and it was always to send the message and to try to invoke fear of some sort, maybe for me to walk away or to quit or whatever.

- TS: But there was a time when Smyrna was zoned to keep Black people out.
- CW: Yes, the Rose Garden area of Smyrna is considered the African American community.
- TS: And right outside the city limits, historically.
- CW: Yes, the church that I pastored was right in the heart of the city. I mean, you're talking two or three blocks from City Hall. You could walk to City Hall from our church. And so, I know that it may have ruffled some feathers. I don't know, but maybe. But I did get calls and fear tactics. I didn't report it. I didn't even share it with the congregation at the time because I didn't want any fear to spread, because you know what FEAR is, right? You know the acronym? It is False Evidence Appearing Real. Whatever they were saying to me on the phone, it was False Evidence Appearing Real. So, I didn't take heed to anything that they were saying, and I didn't know who it was. I didn't even investigate it. Now, if it would have gone to the lengths of vandalism of any sort, then I would've taken action in a way to try to curtail it in some way.
- TS: I'd be careful who walked into the church on a Sunday morning.
- CW: Right, right, yes. We've always had that in our community. We've always had that part. That's always been in our community, the threats, all of that. So, it wasn't new, right? It wasn't new.
- TS: Yes, it may just be that it's reported more these days.
- CW: Yes, yes. There's a lot of evidence of how it can be traced of who did it and all of that. I took it serious enough to consider it, and I documented it, times and dates of when it happened, because if it would have gone any further, then I would have had documented evidence. But it didn't get past that. I was prepared to move forward if it, in fact, would have led to vandalism or any type of terroristic threats or anything like that. The threats weren't really terroristic in that way. It was more so, "N word, leave," "N word, we don't want you," that type of thing. So, I was like "Okay." But it wasn't anything that was a direct threat of what they were going to do or something that was going to happen: "There's a bomb at such and such, and we're going to do this during your service." It was none of that happening. And then we prayed harder and trusted God, and the rest is history now.
- TS: Yes. Now, how did the move to Olive Springs Road come about?
- CW: Olive Springs was an interesting move. We were looking for a larger space to expand and really go forth with the vision that God had given us. We want to do the school. We want to do some affordable housing and some other things. We need property to do it. And so, we met with some people that had real influence, one by the name of Daryl Price, the [executive director] of the Noonday [Baptist] Association. We started putting our heads together, and he shared with me that property—the acreage, and how it's available, and "You look at how you can build this and do that and do this on that property." So, it

appealed to me. So, we're there presently, and we're working on several projects even right now to build it out and to do some affordable housing on that particular property.

TS: And you moved there about a year ago, wasn't it?

CW: Yes, right in the heart of COVID. I mean, man, it was tough because COVID changed and altered everyone's life. I say it like this. COVID was the great revealer. It revealed a lot of things to a lot of people. We knew that if there was ever a time for us to move, "Let's strike while the iron's hot, while everybody's sleeping, while everybody's complaining, while everybody's doing everything else with COVID. Let's make this move." And we did it. So, we're there now, and we're growing. It's a larger facility.

TS: So, COVID didn't affect your membership?

CW: It didn't affect it. Initially, it did. It affected everybody's church. It did. It affected our membership.

TS: I think it gave people a chance to break with habit and consider, "Why am I doing what I'm doing?"

CW: Yes, it affected every church in its own way, right? When we transitioned over, it was a larger facility, but the need was there for the larger facility because of what we're endeavoring to do in the way of school, preschool.

TS: Are the neighbors okay with the affordable housing?

CW: As a matter of fact, we are in that stage now. But what we're doing in the way of affordable housing is going to be for active adults 55 and over. So, there's not going to be a problem with that because you're not going to have to deal with children. You're not going to have to deal with that element, so to speak. But it's for 55 and over, and we're working on some things to collaborate with the county and some other things that we're endeavoring to do that I'm not at liberty to share right now. But it's a very, very sharp capital-gaining entrepreneurial concept that we're invoking into that.

TS: Olive Springs Road in Marietta—is that [Cobb commissioner] Jerica Richardson's district?

CW: Jerica Richardson's district, yes. We're working, and we're going to be doing some great work together, along with [Cobb Commission chair] Lisa Cupid and all the others. It's a collaborative effort. I'm just excited about what's next and the path forward.

TS: What's your membership now?

CW: Membership now, we probably have right at about a hundred people on Sundays, and it's growing very well. The church could probably seat five or six hundred, so, it looks empty. But when you do the head count, you know...

TS: Are you doing virtual services as well as in person?

CW: Yes, we're combined, yes. We stream live on Sundays, but we have more people than we expected coming to the in-person service now, which is amazing because I wasn't expecting the people to start coming back, even with this current surge of COVID-19 and this other thing, the monkeypox.

TS: Now, how did it change from Baptist to Church of God in Christ to independent?

CW: What we did when it was Ponders Avenue Baptist Church was we knew that we were not, quote, unquote, a Baptist church. Now we believe in the same tenets. We baptize in full immersion in the water.

TS: And just adults.

CW: Right. It's the gospel of Matthew Chapter 28[:19], when he [the resurrected Jesus] says, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." So, we held onto that tradition, but there were some other things that we were engaging in and discovering as a congregation that were very charismatic. It didn't suit or fit the Baptist tradition. So, we couldn't call ourselves a Baptist church on the sign. It would be false advertising, right? And so, we didn't call ourselves a Baptist church. At that time, we were like, "Okay, let's sit down. Let's put our heads together." Now we were very familiar with the Church of God in Christ, which is a Pentecostal Holiness Church. Some of what we engaged in, in the way of our worship experience, fell along the same lines of what they believe, their statement of faith, their tenets, all of that. So, we joined and became a part and played integral roles in that organization.

I was blessed to move up in the organization quite fast and was positioned in a very key position in the organization rather quickly. Someone called me one time and says, "Hey, Pastor Walker, I heard that you were a superintendent in the Church of God in Christ." I said, "Yes." He says, "Didn't you just join this Church of God in Christ? How did you get to become... man, you're the luckiest guy in the world." So, I'm hearing that again. But I was elevated to that status. That's a status of like an overseer where you oversee certain churches. The next step is bishop after that. Not that I was seeking any of those positions. It was bestowed upon me. Not one time did I ask for it. Not even one time did I inquire about it. I was called into a room, and they said, "Hey, this is what we're going to do." It happened just like that. So, we were a part of the Church of God in Christ, and we worked, and we served. We were committed and faithful.

Then, right before COVID, there were some things that were transpiring in our church, and I really had to take some time to think about what was next, not only for the church, but also for me. So, I went on a sabbatical. I took time off for ninety days—time for reflection, time for rest, restoration, all of that. I got the opportunity to do more writing, more reading, and do some introspection even with me, because there were times I felt like I was preparing the message for Sunday morning and not reading and preparing for

life, right? A lot of preachers can get caught up into that where they're preparing messages specifically for Sunday morning and not for life. It's a trap that you can get caught in very easily. So, I took a sabbatical and took time off and reflected and was looking at a path forward, a new path forward, a new journey. I started realizing the impact that I've had on not just people of God, but people in general, and then also other church leaders in the way of pastors and others that serve in leadership in ministry around the world, as I still traveled and preached even as a pastor. I started getting calls from other pastors from around the country. They were calling, and they were asking, "Hey, can you cover me?"

TS: Cover me?

CW: Right. For people that don't understand, that means "I want you to oversee my work in the ministry. I need someone to cover me. I don't want to be out here just doing ministry by myself. I need somebody I can answer to, that I'm accountable to, that I'm responsible to, all of that. There were several pastors that were calling me, emailing me, texting me, about me covering them and wanting me to be that overseer and have that oversight. They wanted wisdom, understanding from me. Some of them were young pastors.

TS: That sounds like what a superintendent would do.

CW: Exactly, exactly.

TS: But these are people that are not Church of God in Christ?

CW: Exactly. So, while I'm on this sabbatical I'm getting these calls, I'm getting this information. I'm getting these things, and I take heed, and I start covering them. And so, I make the decision to leave the Churches of God in Christ and to create my own fellowship. In creating my own fellowship, I couldn't do that and still be a part of the organization because it'd be a conflict of interest, because the churches that I cover now—their allegiance is to me, right? So, it would've been a conflict of interest. So, I talked with the bishop, and I shared with him what was next and some of the things that were on the agenda that my dad had shared with me. We talked about moving forward and some things with ministry. The bishop sat with me and said, "Hey, you have my blessing. You're charting a new course, son. Do what God is calling you to do." And so, it birthed some things in me as it relates to what I'm doing now. So, with all of that being said, I've been doing the work, overseeing these churches for some time now. And now this year, October the 29th, I will be consecrated a bishop.

TS: And you told me there's a College of Bishops...

CW: There's a Joint College of Bishops.

TS: Tell us about it.

CW: The Joint College of Bishops is a group of bishops comprised of at least twelve where a council amongst themselves is created. With this council, there's a joint college, so to speak. They bring in those people that are already doing the work, and they trace what they call your bloodline to see if you're distinctively qualified to serve in this office. So, I was thoroughly vetted, and so here we are.

TS: So, you're going to be a bishop in October?

CW: October the 29th, I will be consecrated a bishop. That in and of itself is a huge deal, of course, in our community. But yes, I'll be consecrated in October of this year of 2022. The church, everybody's excited about it. My dad's excited.

TS: I bet.

CW: Can you imagine? All this history of where we come from and all of that.

TS: So, in this tradition, a bishop is not a part of a hierarchy so much as a mentor to others? An advisor to pastors throughout the country?

CW: That too, but it is a hierarchy as well. A spiritual dignitary is what a bishop holds in terms of his authority. But my role will definitely be in a prelate role where I'm over a group of pastors that have their own churches, their own missions, their own works that they're doing throughout the world. This is an international fellowship that has been birthed and created. There are churches in Jamaica that I oversee, Trinidad, Cayman [Islands], Georgia, Florida, New York; they're all over the place. And so, it will be official in October.

TS: Fantastic. I've got about two more questions.

CW: Sure.

TS: First, Greater Grace International—how did that name change come about?

CW: It was the original name when I was pastoring and preaching before, when I was at the hotel. Remember I was holding services at the hotel? I was holding them under Greater Grace. But when I came to Ponders, I had to fall under that name. I had to put Greater Grace on ice for a minute because they voted me as the pastor of Ponders Avenue Baptist Church.

TS: Okay, that makes good sense.

CW: So then in time we did the transitional change. We did it on paper. We did it in business with the Secretary of State. We did everything by the book. And that name is derived from a scripture in the book of Acts, chapter 4, verse 33, where it says [about the apostles and the early church in Jerusalem], "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace [was upon them all]." One version

says, “And greater grace was upon them all.” [And verse 34 continues:] “None of them went lacking.” But it talks about how great grace was upon them all. It was talking about the early church, the new church in the book of Acts after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So that’s where the name came from. That’s where we came up with the name.

TS: I did mean to ask you, when you became Pentecostal, did people speak in tongue in your church or does charismatic mean something different than that?

CW: Yes, they do speak in tongues in our church. Most charismatic churches do follow along those lines of speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is from the [Greek] word where they get glossolalia [*glossa* meaning “tongue” and *laleo* meaning “to speak”]. Have you heard of that? Glossolalia, they “speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gives them utterance” [Acts 2:4]. There is debate with that because Paul dealt with it with the Corinthian church, and he says, “Hey, if you’re going to speak, somebody needs to be interpreting that.” [1 Corinthians 14:5 NKJV: “I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.”]

Because [the congregation says], “You’re talking. Hey, what’s going on? We’re confused here.” But what else has to be understood is that it’s a prayer language. Oftentimes, when people are speaking in tongues, they’re praying to God. They’re having a conversation with God. So, leave them alone. Let them talk to God. Go about your business, but let them have their time with God, right? And so, when you look at it from that perspective, it somewhat allows for people to understand that we might need to back off this argument, that it’s inappropriate or whatever.

TS: Well, it was certainly there in the early church.

CW: It was there. It was evident in the early church, so you can’t deny it.

TS: Okay, another question: I looked on your website, and you’ve got a co-pastor. We haven’t talked about her very much, Lady Katavah [LeChe’ Walker].

CW: That’s my wife; that’s my wife for life. She is anointed to do what she does. What I mean by that is for her to be a wife of a pastor and knowing what a pastor endures and goes through and has to deal with, she has to be right there going through it, dealing with it, just like I do. It takes someone special to be able to do that. But she’s anointed to sing. She’s anointed even to preach. And she’s also anointed for counsel. She can sit down and counsel certain people about certain things that I couldn’t do. She has a different approach. She’s the sweet. I might be the sour. I don’t know, but it works. You know what I mean? But it works, and it wouldn’t work without her. Her background of course is church and a lot of singing. She has recorded before. Her name is there, and you can Google her. She’s recorded and made records and albums with gospel groups.

And as a matter of fact, we're getting ready to embark upon doing something with her in the way of recording in the not-too-distant future. But she's a jewel. She's been there for me through it all. I know we've shared a lot in this time that we've been talking, but still the half has not been told, because even when I was sick and couldn't get well, she was there. Because throughout this whole timespan of what I have shared today, you're looking at someone who has overcome all of these surgeries that I've had to have on my left leg to be able to walk.

TS: You're still doing surgeries?

CW: No more surgeries, but to be able to walk.

TS: You seem to walk very well.

CW: I walk well. I dance well in church. I run and exercise well in the gym. But through it all, these surgeries, heart attack, double pneumonia, about to die, this last bout going through C. Diff [clostridium difficile], my wife was there. And I'll be honest with you. I would not have made it had not she had been there.

TS: Oh, that's a blessing.

CW: She's a blessing. She's a jewel. She's anointed for what she does.

TS: You have one daughter. How old is she now?

CW: Twelve years old, middle school.

TS: Is she going to be a gospel singer?

CW: Probably not. She's probably not going to do any of that. We don't force any of that on her.

TS: Basketball player or any athletics?

CW: She's fast at running, probably run some track or something like that, but we don't force anything on her. We kind of let her flow. These kids these days, you've got to kind of just let them flow in their world, put the guard rails there, but still let them kind of flow in their world. I try to dress her for school, and it's like, "No, Dad. Give me a t-shirt and some jeans," and she's done. It's like when we were growing up, "You're putting clothes on to go to school, man. You're putting some clothes on." But God has been good to us, and we have been blessed. It's been an interesting journey, and I know it's not over, but we've come a long way. For me to start out not even wanting to preach really, and now counseling and mentoring preachers, it's an interesting thing how God just sets you up so to speak.

TS: Well, have we left anything out that you wanted to talk about?

CW: I don't think we have. I think we've covered the surface of pretty much what needed to be covered. Maybe another interview we can take a deep dive more into some more of the family history and go into more depth of the life and times of my enslaved family on both sides and how it differed. One would think it was all one way, but it wasn't. It differed. But that's another interview with that. But I've enjoyed myself.

TS: Well, fantastic. Thank you very much.

CW: Thank you for your time; I appreciate it.

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